

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

15th Meeting, 2023 (Session 6), Wednesday
25 October 2023

PE2037: Improve literacy attainment through research-informed reading instruction

Petitioner	Anne Glennie
Petition summary	Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• provide national guidance, support, and professional learning for teachers in research-informed reading instruction, specifically systematic synthetic phonics;• ensure teacher training institutions train new teachers in research-informed reading instruction, specifically systematic synthetic phonics.
Webpage	https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2037

Introduction

1. This is a new petition that was lodged on 29 June 2023.
2. A full summary of this petition and its aims can be found at **Annexe A**.
3. A SPICe briefing has been prepared to inform the Committee's consideration of the petition and can be found at **Annexe B**.
4. Every petition can collect signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 621 signatures have been received on this petition.
5. The Committee seeks views from the Scottish Government on all new petitions before they are formally considered. A response has been received from the Scottish Government and is included at **Annexe C** of this paper.
6. A submission has been provided by the petitioner. This is included at **Annexe D**.

Action

The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take on this petition.

Clerk to the Committee

Annexe A

PE2037: Improve literacy attainment through research-informed reading instruction

Petitioner

Anne Glennie

Date lodged

29 June 2023

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to:

- provide national guidance, support, and professional learning for teachers in research-informed reading instruction, specifically systematic synthetic phonics;
- ensure teacher training institutions train new teachers in research-informed reading instruction, specifically systematic synthetic phonics.

Previous action

I previously lodged [a petition on this issue](#) in June 2017, and gave evidence to the Public Petitions Committee in [November 2017](#). The petition was then referred to the Education and Skills Committee. Despite lengthy correspondence with John Swinney MSP (then Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education & Skills), the petition was closed in May 2022 on the basis that the Committee had no plans to scrutinise initial training education.

I have met with and written to Alasdair Allan MSP on several occasions and have also been in email contact with Oliver Mundell MSP.

Background information

This petition has the potential to improve attainment in literacy and to close the attainment gap.

Systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) is an approach to initial reading instruction which explicitly teaches letters and sounds, enabling children to read unfamiliar words by sounding out and blending.

Research shows that children taught by SSP make short and long-term gains in reading, spelling and reading comprehension.

While most schools in Scotland use some form of phonics, the vast majority also use sight words (memorisation of whole words); multi-cueing strategies (where children are taught to look at the pictures, the first or last letters in a word, or to use their knowledge of context/sentence structure to work out/guess unfamiliar words); and old-style levelled reading books (instead of phonically decodable readers).

This means that the most common type of reading instruction in Scotland is not aligned with the scientific evidence.

Additional background information is available [here](#).

Annexe B

The logo for SPICe, featuring the text 'SPICe' in a white, sans-serif font on a dark purple background.

The Information Centre
An t-Ionad Fiosrachaidh

Briefing for the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on petition PE2037: Improve literacy attainment through research-informed reading instruction, lodged by Anne Glennie

Brief overview of issues raised by the petition

The petition seeks two actions, to—

- provide national guidance, support, and professional learning for teachers in research-informed reading instruction, specifically systematic synthetic phonics;
- ensure teacher training institutions train new teachers in research-informed reading instruction, specifically systematic synthetic phonics.

Synthetic phonics means the teaching of reading “in which phonemes (sounds) associated with particular graphemes (letters or groups of letters) are pronounced in isolation and blended together (synthesised)”.¹ The systematic element refers to the order in which these phonemes are taught – starting with the easiest sounds and progressing through to the most complex. There are other phonics approaches, eg analytical phonics.

Previous petition

This petition is substantially the same as [PE1668](#) which was lodged in 2017. In Session 5 the petition was considered by the Public Petitions

¹ National Literacy Trust <https://literacytrust.org.uk/information/what-is-literacy/what-phonics/>

Committee and referred to the Education and Skills Committee. The petition was closed by the current Education, Children and Young People Committee. That Committee's reason to close the petition was—

“That [the Committee] has no current plans to scrutinise initial training education. ... the Committee agreed that should it consider initial training education later in the parliamentary session, it would reflect on the issues raised in your petition as part of its work.”

The policy landscape in relation to guidance and the autonomy of higher education institutions has not substantially changed since 2017.

The [SPICe briefing for the 2017 petition](#) noted that synthetic phonics is part of the national curriculum in England – since 2013 most primary schools in England are required to teach reading using systematic synthetic phonics and a “phonics screening check” which monitors progress of pupils, normally at the end of Year 1.

In its submissions to the Session 5 Public Petitions Committee, the Scottish Government's view was that synthetic phonics is one of a range of approaches teachers might utilise. The then Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills said in [his first submission](#) on the petition:

“Curriculum for Excellence is a teacher-led approach to learning. Our curricular approach is deliberately non-prescriptive, recognising that children learn in different and unique ways and that it is for empowered practitioners and teachers to decide the teaching methods which are most appropriate for individual children. As such, prescribing any single approach to learning and teaching runs contrary to the principles and framework on which the curriculum is based.”

And then later—

“I agree that teaching phonics is an important part of learning to read, but that it is only one part of the approach to learning to read and systematic synthetic phonics is only one of a range of phonics approaches. ... While there is evidence to say that teaching phonics systematically helps children learn to read, there is debate among academics as to whether the synthetic phonics method is better than other methods.”

The General Teaching Council for Scotland echoed this view, it said—

“The issue of the application of Synthetic Phonics is one which has been debated by the education system for over two decades both internationally and at UK level. A significant level of research has been undertaken in order to identify its impact. This research would indicate that for some children there is an improvement in their reading skills while other research would suggest that the complexity of reading acquisition in English makes it unlikely that the universal adoption of one method, synthetic phonics only, leads to overall improvement.”

The submissions the Session 5 Public Petitions Committee received from academics provide a flavour of the debates on approaches to teaching younger children to read, and particularly the focus on synthetic phonics (see for example submissions from [Dr Sarah McGeown](#) and [Dr Terry Wrigley](#).) In addition, the GTCS’s submission [highlighted a paper](#) which discussed some of the debates around the evidence supporting the use of systemic phonics.

Guidance

Guidance in Scotland on teaching reading to younger pupils does not promote one approach above others. For example, the [Principles and Practice for Literacy and English](#) refers to the use of phonics amongst other methods, although doesn’t specify synthetic phonics.

“Teachers will balance play-based learning with more systematic development and learning of skills and techniques for reading, including phonics.”

Education Scotland offers support to practitioners in a number of areas, including literacy and synthetic phonics, through online platforms such as the National Literacy Professional Learning Community.

In late 2021, the Scottish Government announced it would set up a National Response to Improving Literacy group. The [National Improvement Framework published in December 2022](#) reported that a Terms of Reference paper has been produced. The outcome of the work of this group was to develop “recommendations aimed at enhancing practitioners’ professional learning in literacy and improving further the learning experiences of children and young people.”

The Scottish approach to curriculum content and pedagogy is intended to be less prescriptive than in England. The UK Government’s [Department for Education recently updated its Reading Framework](#)

[which is detailed guidance](#) “for primary and secondary schools to meet existing expectations for teaching reading”. Systematic synthetic phonics is a crucial element of this guidance. The DfE highlights a number of sources to support its focus on systematic synthetic phonics. These including the [2006 Independent review of the teaching of early reading](#) by Jim Rose and, from the USA, [the 2000 Report of the national reading panel: teaching children to read](#), and a Scottish Executive funded [seven-year study by Johnston and Watson undertaken in Clackmannanshire, published in 2005](#).

Teacher education courses and ongoing professional learning

The quality of teaching of reading is important. [A guidance report by the Education Endowment Foundation](#) says, “based on evidence from primary schools, it is likely that the quality of phonics provision is as important as the quantity of instruction provided” and one of the features of an effective programme includes ensuring that all staff have the “necessary pedagogical skills and content knowledge, for example, sufficient linguistic knowledge and understanding”.

Teachers in Scotland must undertake an Initial Teacher Education (“ITE”) course offered at university. The ITE course will include a significant period of working in school classrooms. Teachers normally would then undertake a probationary year in a school before being able to fully register as a teacher in Scotland. Teachers are expected to continually undertake professional learning throughout their career. Employers (normally local authorities) have a significant role in supporting probationer and fully qualified teachers’ learning and continuing professional development.

The content of university courses is, to a degree, governed by the GTCS’s requirements for all ITE programmes. These state—

“The [ITE] programme should include educational theory and practice that supports student teachers to develop their knowledge, understanding and practice in areas such as educational theory, childhood development and developing positive relationships. The legal and statutory frameworks which govern teachers’ work should also be addressed throughout the programme.”

However, the universities are independent institutions and have autonomy over the specific content of their ITE courses.

Ned Sharratt
SPICe Researcher

20/08/2023

The purpose of this briefing is to provide a brief overview of issues raised by the petition. SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However, if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at spice@parliament.scot

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in petition briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

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Annexe C

Scottish Government submission of 11 August 2023

PE2037/A: Improve literacy attainment through research-informed reading instruction

I am aware that the petitioner of the above petition previously submitted Petition No PE1668, which also called on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to:

- *Provide national guidance, support, and professional learning for teachers in research-informed reading instruction, specifically systematic synthetic phonics*
- *To ensure teacher training institutions train new teachers in research-informed reading instruction, specifically systematic synthetic phonics.*

The Scottish Government's approach to improving literacy is being taken forward as part of the "National Response to Improving Literacy" which is referenced within the [National Improvement Framework](#) 2023 publication. The National Response to Improving Literacy partnership board is overseeing the development of a series of recommendations aimed at enhancing teachers' professional learning in literacy and improving further the learning experiences of children and young people.

The skill of decoding is foundational to learning to read and it is important that systematic phonics approaches are used in Scotland's schools to support young children to develop this skill. Education Scotland and local education authorities continue to work with educators at all levels of the system to share understanding of research-informed approaches to Early Reading, to enhance teachers' access to research-informed support and to facilitate professional learning in order to improve early reading pedagogies.

Guidance

The petitioner may be interested to know that Education Scotland already has work underway on a range of new resources relating to early reading.

These are designed to promote teachers' understanding of early reading as a complex interplay of skills and background factors. Part of this will outline how systematic phonics approaches, including SSP, form one aspect of an overall pedagogy for early reading. In line with other items of guidance relating to Scotland's curriculum, the resources are being developed within a broader context which seeks to empower schools to adapt their approach to meet the needs of individual learners. In creating the guidance, Education Scotland officials are consulting a range of stakeholders with an interest in early reading in order to use their feedback to inform the development process.

Initial Teacher Education

In relation to initial teacher education (ITE), the petition asks that the Scottish Government "ensure teacher training institutions train new teachers in research-informed reading instruction, specifically systematic synthetic phonics".

Initial Teacher Education is the foundation of a teacher's professional learning journey where they will focus on developing an enquiring and collaborative approach to allow them to grow as professionals. It is the responsibility of the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) to accredit all ITE programmes against the Standard for Provisional Registration (SfPR). Under this role, the GTCS aims to ensure that ITE programmes support student teachers to develop their knowledge, understanding and practice and to ensure that student teachers are exposed to a range of pedagogies to teach literacy and reading instruction.

The SfPR highlights the need to have knowledge and understanding of pedagogical theories and how to apply educational research into practice, with student teachers expected to engage critically with research to challenge and inform professional practice. Importantly, the SfPR is not prescriptive or directive in nature.

A [Self-evaluation framework for Initial Teacher Education](#) designed to support universities to demonstrate the quality of their existing ITE provision and to identify areas for improvement has been developed in partnership between Education Scotland, the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) and the Scottish Council of Deans of Education (SCDE). One of its aims is to ensure students are supported to develop a detailed understanding of their professional responsibilities in relation

to literacy. Literacy was a theme of the Framework in 2022 where universities shared good practice and challenges in developing understanding of concepts, skills and purpose of literacy amongst student teachers. A recent research report ([MQuITE](#)) led by SCDE and GTCS shows that ITE graduates are highly confident in their literacy knowledge and skills.

It is important that Scottish Ministers respect the independence of individual ITE institutions and do not prescribe the detailed content of courses. Whilst mindful of the distinct roles and independence of ITE institutions, I have asked officials to write to the Chair of the Scottish Council of Deans of Education to request an update on the current provision of ITE in relation to teacher skills and confidence to support children's reading in primary schools.

Jenny Gilruth MSP
Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills

Annexe D

Petitioner submission of 11 September 2023

PE2037/B: Improve literacy attainment through research-informed reading instruction

I am writing to the Committee in response to the submission from the [Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills](#).

Guidance

I welcome the news that Education Scotland is working on new early reading resources. This is long overdue as, other than the POLAAR (Primary One Literacy Assessment and Action Resource) document, there has been no guidance for teachers on this subject since before the introduction of Curriculum for Excellence.

The emphasis on early reading depending on a '*complex interplay of skills and background factors*' is concerning. Virtually all children (95%+) can be taught to read with systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) despite background and circumstances ([Burk, Hasbrouck, 2023](#)). Longitudinal research shows that SSP is also effective with children thought to be vulnerable and disadvantaged because of factors such as gender, socio-economic group, EAL, age, ASN, dyslexia, low language/social skills ([Grant, 2014](#)).

The Foundational Role of Phonics in Learning to Read

I am glad that there is agreement that the skill of decoding (and by necessity knowledge of letters and sounds and their relationship to the alphabetic code for English) is foundational to learning to read. If this is the case, why are decoding for reading and encoding for spelling, along with how the English language works, and how the brain learns to read, absent from current teacher education?

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and Measuring Quality in Initial Teacher Education (MQiITE)

I look forward to the requested update from the Scottish Council of Deans of Education (SCDE) on the provision for teaching reading in primary in ITE. However, given the conclusion of their six-year study ([MQiITE, 2023](#)) that '*Graduates report no real areas of persistent*

weakness, and levels of confidence and self-efficacy remain fairly high and fairly stable over time’, I have little faith in their capacity, or motivation, to reflect the reality of the current situation.

The MQulTE study’s conclusions completely contradict previous findings on this issue, including the SCDE’s *own* report from 2019.

The ‘[Review of the Scottish Government Literacy Hub Approach](#)’ (2014) reported “a worrying mix of knowledge and understanding of the pedagogy of reading by students and newly qualified teachers” who “*did not have a confident working knowledge of the pedagogy of reading*”.

‘[Gathering views on probationer teachers’ readiness to teach](#)’ (2017) described new teachers’ ability to teach reading and phonics as an “*area of concern*”. Local Authority probationer managers “*noted issues in the level of preparedness to teach reading and phonics*”. Teaching reading was also highlighted by the probationers themselves as “*an area in which they were less confident*”.

Further, the ‘[Scottish Council of the Deans of Education Attainment Challenge Project](#)’ (2019), highlighted “*the emerging need for: better data literacy; more strategies for working with pupils with additional or complex needs; better pedagogic content knowledge around teaching literacy and numeracy*”. Three reports in as many years—all reinforcing the clear issues with reading pedagogy and literacy teaching, including phonics—yet now we are supposed to believe that there are “*no real areas of persistent weakness*” and that “*levels of confidence and self-efficacy remain fairly high and fairly stable over time*”.

This raises serious questions about the quality and validity of the MQulTE study. Should the SCDE be ‘marking its own jotters’, so to speak? Is a restricted sample of just over 900 people (and only 12% of the target group) sufficient to yield reliable data? Is a self-reporting statement of confidence from NQTs anywhere near adequate to evaluate the quality of ITE in Scotland?

Regarding the ‘distinct roles and independence of ITE institutions’, I agree that it is not desirable, nor should it be necessary, to prescribe content to our ITE institutions—it is the universities, as seats of learning, research and development, who should be leading the profession and informing them of the latest international evidence-based practices. The petition does not ask for systematic synthetic phonics to be prescribed

as the *only* information student teachers receive—it simply asks that it is *included*—as currently this is not the case.

'At Uni we were not taught how to teach children to read, instead we were just told it's important. This is frustrating, mainly because I feel that uni never actually taught us how to teach anything, it was more about why! I would love to have seen some lessons being demonstrated for every subject. With reading being so important this should definitely be covered more.'

Strathclyde University Graduate Primary Teacher, 2023

I implore the committee to seek out the researchers, psychologists, and neuroscientists, who are specialists in the field of reading acquisition, rather than relying solely on the limited scope of academics in education.

Reality

Reading is the fundamental skill upon which all academic learning depends. Every day in Scotland, children with dyslexia and reading difficulties, and their families, deal with the impact of systemic failure in the teaching of reading. It is now recognised that *“Dyslexia does not develop when children begin with a good synthetic phonics programme and when slow-to-start children are given extra practice and teaching with synthetic phonics in order to keep up”* ([Grant, 2014](#)).

Teachers who have not been trained in the reading science or dyslexia are not best placed to provide the necessary tailored assessment and teaching required to remediate these difficulties.

Over a third of children in Scotland now have an additional support need (ASN)².

According to the SQA, ‘a record number of candidates’ (roughly one in five) in 2023 required special arrangements when sitting their exams³. The most common was separate accommodation for students who

² [There were 241,639 pupils \(34.2% of all pupils\) with an additional support need \(ASN\) recorded in 2022.](#)

³ [Record number of Scottish students given extra support to sit exams \(TES Scotland\)](#)

required a *scribe* or a *reader*. In many cases, this will be because the student cannot read or write independently. This is an unacceptable situation, but nothing is being done to address the root cause of these literacy difficulties.

It is long past time to acknowledge these problems and follow the reading science by providing teachers with the information and support they need, and by giving children the best chance of success through research-informed reading instruction. In good conscience, how could we do anything else?